



**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**  
ONE UNION STATION  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903  
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

Testimony Re: H-5164, Rhode Island Early  
Childhood IDEA Task Force

House Education Committee

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Leanne Barrett, Director of Early Childhood  
Policy and Strategy



Rhode Island KIDS COUNT coordinates the Right from the Start Campaign, a state policy coalition led by eight organizations to advance state policies and budget priorities that help babies and young children get off to the right start.

**Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly support Rep. Carson's bill, H-5164, to create and fund an Early Childhood IDEA Task force** to develop recommendations, including adequate staffing and financing, to meet the needs of babies and young children who have developmental delays and disabilities.

Families with babies and young children across the state are facing significant delays and disruptions in receiving Early Intervention (under age 3) and Preschool Special Education (ages 3 to K entry) services that are required under the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*.

**The state needs a coherent Birth to Kindergarten IDEA plan which would include examining the design and delivery of services to children and the financing and staffing needed.** Rhode Island could consider expanding the current itinerant preschool special education model to reach more children enrolled in community-based programs like Head Start and child care. Rhode Island could explore models used in other states including offering a Birth through 5 Early Intervention system and/or regionalizing preschool special education services so staff can cross district lines and meet family needs. Rhode Island needs a plan to develop, attract, and retain qualified staff for these systems.

The Early Childhood IDEA system in Rhode Island is complicated and has not been adequately financed. The Early Intervention system is overseen by EOHHS and involves 9 agencies. **The state allowed this system to go more than 20 years without a rate increase, leading to a staffing crisis and waiting lists.** The preschool special education system is overseen by RIDE and involves 35 school districts, one state-operated school, and one charter school. Most school districts are screening only about one-third of the children they are supposed to screen. And many children are not receiving their services in inclusive settings.

**Data as of mid-January indicate that there is still a waiting list for Early Intervention**, more than three years after the first waiting list was created after two significant Medicaid rate increases and investment of an additional \$11 million in state-managed ARPA funds **As of January 2025, there were**

**283 children who have been waiting for Early Intervention for more than 45 days.**

The number waiting is smaller than it was last year, but agencies are still struggling to staff the program. **One staffing strategy that you may not be aware of is that in early 2024 EOHHS changed the regulations to remove a requirement that Early Intervention service coordinators (known as Early Interventionist I) have a college degree.** Now Service Coordinators only need a high school diploma. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT opposed that change which was requested by EI providers to help them address the staffing crisis. The change has helped fill those roles, but staff vacancies remain -- particularly for Physical Therapists, Occupational Therapists, and Speech Therapists.

School districts are also struggling to fill staff positions and meet their obligations and timelines to conduct screenings, complete evaluations, and provide services to children from age 3 up to kindergarten entry.

Babies, young children, and their families need an early childhood IDEA system that works. Early Intervention agencies and school districts need an early childhood IDEA system that works. We all pay the long-term costs when children do not get what they need to thrive.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

# Early Childhood IDEA Task Force 2025

H-5164 (Carson) & S-TBD (Valverde)



Right from the  
Start

The federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* makes states responsible for delivering Early Intervention services to infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities, and it makes states and school districts responsible for overseeing and delivering special education services to young children from age three to kindergarten entry. In Rhode Island, the Early Intervention program is overseen by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) and delivered by 9 certified Early Intervention agencies. Preschool special education is overseen by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and delivered by 35 school districts, one state-operated school (RI School for the Deaf), and one charter school (Highlander).

Both the Early Intervention and the Preschool Special Education systems in Rhode Island have been **experiencing financial and staffing problems that limit babies' and young children's access to early childhood IDEA services.**

## Early Intervention (Infants and Toddlers) Challenges:

- Recent Medicaid rate increases following decades of frozen rates have helped address the Early Intervention staffing crisis, but providers in **Rhode Island continue to struggle to attract and retain qualified EI staff**, particularly physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists.
- More than three years after the state established a waiting list for Early Intervention, children are still not receiving on time evaluations. **As of January 2025, there were 283 infants and toddlers on the waiting list.** The average wait for these children was 104.1 days.
- As of December 2024, none of the 9 Early Intervention providers were determined to meet federal indicators and requirements.

## Preschool Special Education (Ages 3 to K entry) Challenges

- School districts struggle to attract and retain qualified early childhood special education teachers and clinical staff which cause disruptions and delays in early childhood IDEA evaluations and services.
- In 2023, the Providence Public School District and the Rhode Island Department of Education agreed to a settlement plan citing “**systemic failure to comply with federal law**” to provide critical IDEA services to preschool-age children. A court-appointed monitor continues to oversee the settlement plan.
- Statewide, districts complete developmental screenings for only 37% of preschool-age children and **complete evaluations for only 60% of children referred to special education.**
- There is a great deal of variability across school districts with Providence at 39% and East Greenwich at 98% of preschool-age children receiving services in an inclusive general education setting.

**The Early Childhood IDEA Task Force bill** requires the state to seek funding to establish and staff a **public-private task force** which would develop recommendations to strengthen IDEA services for babies and young children with developmental delays and disabilities, from birth up to kindergarten entry (across both Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education).